

Michael Muhammad Knight. *Magic in Islam*. New York: TarcherPerigee, 2016. 246 pp. ISBN: 978-0-399-17670-8. \$17.00.

Magic in Islam is the outcome of the natural progression of Michael Muhammad Knight's career as a writer and, more recently, as an academic. Since his 2004 debut novel *The Taqwacores*¹ where he introduced "Punk Islam" as a distinct counter-culture phenomenon, Knight has been fascinated with fringe and marginalized narratives of Islam, with occasional references to Sufism, in order to challenge the mainstream perceptions of what Islam is and could be especially in the context of post-9/11 America. His interest in esotericism in particular further evolved in two books preceding *Magic in Islam*. In *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran*² Knight engages in cut-up experiments while chronicling the life and works of Peter Lamborn Wilson (Hakim Bey) and discussing a history of Traditionalism and the Henry Corbin circle in Iran. In *Tripping with Allah: Islam, Drugs, and Writing*³ he explores ayahuasca mystical experiences with members of Santo Daime that result in him having some entheogenic visions of Fatima and Ali (Prophet Muhammad's daughter and son-in-law). In fact, Knight's extensive body of writing over the past fifteen years has been largely autobiographical where he moves in between fiction, reality, and history to explore and express his own beliefs as a white American Muslim convert. Yet, after obtaining a PhD in Islamic Studies in 2016 and now being an Assistant Professor of Religion and Cultural Studies at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Knight's most recent works (including *Muhammad: Forty Introductions*⁴) have moved towards being more scholarly and impersonal.

1. Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Taqwacores* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2004).

2. Michael Muhammad Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Quran* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012).

3. Michael Muhammad Knight, *Tripping with Allah: Islam, Drugs, and Writing* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2013).

4. Michael Muhammad Knight, *Muhammad: Forty Introductions* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2019).

Magic in Islam thus is first and foremost a book by a counterculture creative writer who is now rather invested in scholarly and less idiosyncratic topics and discussions. Put differently, it is not an academic but a popular book, yet backed up by critical historical research within a post-structuralist framework that questions essentialist and religionist understandings of religion in general and Islam in particular, while also being sensitive about dialogues and interactions between Islam and other religious traditions (e.g. Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism) in the formation of magical and esoteric discourses. As Knight asserts early in the introduction, the book could serve as an unconventional example of the “Intro to Islam” genre that became popular in the aftermath of 9/11. Knight’s proposed readers are then ranging from anyone with limited or no knowledge of Islam or magic to experts of religious studies who would be interested in hearing about the overlooked yet enthralling and diverse engagements of Islam and magic.

Knight suggests in the introduction that “[m]aybe this book should just be called *Weird Shit in Islam*. . . they’re items that popularly go into our considerations of magic, esotericism, and the occult, and I’m interested in these things as engaged by people who call themselves Muslims. So whether or not we can reliably identify anything in the world as ‘magic’ or ‘Islam,’ here’s a book about magic in Islam” (25). This assertion might be the clearest account of the scope of this project. In a way the book lacks a coherent main argument or thesis (in an academic sense), as it generally depicts snapshots of some intersections of “magic” and “Islam.” Nevertheless, similar to some of his other projects (starting with *The Taqvacores*), Knight’s main point is to showcase and prove that Islams (plural) “other” than the orthodox and the mainstream also exist or are possible to exist, as he sums up at the end: “Rethinking Muslim magics could open the floodgates for a wild new universe of interpretive possibilities” (200). That is to say, in the case of this book the readers learn about an Islam that has a complex and neglected history of magical texts, beliefs, practices, and rituals.

What is “magic” referring to in the context of this book? Knight treats magic primarily as a constructed category, a relegated *other* of the dominant discourses of religion and science (themselves being constructed categories as well). Emphasizing some colonial and ideological dimensions of these relational categories, Knight discusses how “magic, religion, and science as distinct stops along the march of civilizational progress affirmed the right—even the *duty*—of ‘advanced’ scientific nations to invade and colonize magical peoples who had failed to properly develop” (12). Even though Knight does not use Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s term “rejected knowledge,” he does in practice formulate magic as a form of knowledge that has been rejected through social and political power dynamics.⁵ He notes for instance, with respect to the history of Islam, that “[t]here are also the intellectuals of the past who, for whatever reason, failed to become authoritative for later generations. When we leave them out of our books, we present Islam as an unchanging thing that exists outside of time, rather than as the site of contests between competing forces with different ideas about what constitutes the authentic and authoritative . . .” (2). The debate on the status of magic in Islam, according to Knight, is mainly a result of these power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Meanwhile, Knight considers some alternative terms to the word “magic,” in particular “esotericism” and “occultism” (at times he uses these terms interchangeably), yet his discussion on the reasons why he favors the former (as the proper umbrella term) to the latter two is brief and not quite convincing (for example he claims that using

5. Although Knight makes references to works such as Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Strausberg’s edited volume *Defining Magic: A Reader* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013) or Olav Hammer’s *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), it appears that he had not been familiar with the academic field of the study of (Western) esotericism at the time of writing *Magic in Islam*. I say “at the time,” since in his recent article in the Special Issue of *Correspondences* on Islamic Esotericism (Michael Muhammad Knight, “I am Sorry, Mr. White Man, These are Secrets that You are Not Permitted to Learn: The Supreme Wisdom Lessons and Problem Book,” *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 167–200.) he uses the term “rejected knowledge” from Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

“esotericism” would blow his project wide open, but this could be similarly true about his usage of the term “magic” as a wide umbrella term).

The six chapters that follow the introduction (plus a conclusion at the end) read like a collection of essays where each touch on one particular aspect of the relation of magic and Islam. In Chapter 2, Knight discusses the status of magic in the Quran while paying attention to some problems of interpretation (for instance when it comes to the Arabic word *sibr* which connotes magic and sorcery). Chapter 3, “The Force of the Letters,” looks at the Quran from another perspective: the power of letters, words, and writing, and recitation as a form of magical speech act. Here some healing and protective qualities of certain verses of the Quran are noted, in addition to the numerical values ascribed to letters. Chapter 4 examines the topic of astrology including its political and imperial dimensions, while further discussing the constructed boundaries of science, religion, and magic. This is where an additional chapter on alchemy [*kimia* in Arabic]—a topic surprisingly absent throughout the book—could have been appropriate in order to follow up on the problematic of relations between the three. Chapter 5, one of the more interesting chapters from a comparative viewpoint, investigates the figures of Hermes, Thoth, Enoch, Metatron, and Idris through the Muslim and Islamic sources. Chapter 6 is on dream interpretation and also touches on Knight’s personal experiences of psychoactive visions from *Tripping with Allah*.

Whereas all these chapters are primarily concerned with materials from classical and medieval Islam that are mostly from Arabic-speaking regions, Chapter 7 suddenly shifts to 20th century African-American Muslim traditions (i.e. the Moorish Science Temple of America, the Nation of Islam, and the Five Percenters). As fascinating and informative as this chapter is (and note it is an area that Knight has done extensive research on for years and is a worthy source of scholarship), it damages the integrity of the book that overall deals with classical Islam within a theme-based framework. Perhaps a few more chapters on other contemporary or modern emanations of magic and Islam would have better justified the inclusion of this chapter.

Overall, *Magic in Islam* is hardly a systematic and comprehensive study of Islam and magic (or esotericism, to use the more common umbrella term). The word “in” in the title might indicate that the book deals with “magic” as a sub-category of “Islam,” but that is not the case and perhaps using the word “and” instead would have clarified that the book works at the intersections of the two categories. Still, given the lack of reliable academic sources on the topic (not only in European languages but also in languages like Arabic, Turkish, or Persian) and the freshness of this area of study (i.e. Islamic Esotericism, or Islam and Esotericism) its publication is much welcomed and appreciated. The book can possibly be used for undergraduate level courses on the study of esotericism or religious studies courses on Islam despite its narrow scope, while its list of references, especially those from the field of Islamic Studies, can provide some excellent further readings for both students and researchers.

In the “Conclusion,” Knight states that “[b]y no means did I seek to catalog every appearance of a text or practice found anywhere in the ‘Muslim world’ that could be branded as magic” (195). Reading this book, it becomes ever more clear how much such a comprehensive academic catalog (or encyclopedia or dictionary) is needed to map out the areas and topics for any future study of magic, esotericism, and Islam.

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